DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 829 SP 028 825

AUTHOR Lee, Sharon; And Others
TITLE Explicit Teacher Theory: Linking Theory and Practice.
PUB DATE [87]
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Decision Making; Elementary Secondary Education; *Instructional Improvement; *Professional Development; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Behavior; *Teacher Effectiveness; Teacher Student Relationship; *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

Brief descriptions are given of three studies that explored the role of theory in instruction, decision-making, professional development and teacher/student transactions. The first, by Karen Ray, was an observation study of three reading/language arts teachers who were seen to act consistently according to their personal theory of reading and writing. The second, by Leslie Patterson, a naturalistic study of one teacher's process of explicit theory building, supported the literature concerning the theoretical nature of instructional decision-making. The third study, by Sharon Lee, developed a model of explicit theory formulation that outlines the path that many teachers followed as they progressed from novice teachers to empowered educators who are easily able to share theory with colleagues. Four ways in which explicit theoretical orientations can function for teachers are discussed: (1) explicit theories can give teachers criteria for evaluating professional decisions; (2) explicit theories can be easier to revise than intuitions; (3) theory-building is productive for teachers; and (4) explicit theories give teachers a sense of control in the classroom and in their professional development. (JD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED282829

Sharon Lee
Leslie Patterson
Karen Ray

Texas A&M University

EXPLICIT TEACHER THEORY:

Linking Theory and Practice

Correspondence to: Sharon Lee
Dept. of EdCI
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas 77843

SP028825

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Lee, Sharon

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

EXPLICIT TEACHER THEORY:

Linking Theory and Practice

In recent years, the cry has been to link educational theory to classroom practice as teachers have begged university professors to make theory more practical and teacher educators have attempted to make practice more theoretical. This is an ongoing struggle that we recognize, and suggest that we must continue to give attention to these issues.

"Theory into practice" has been a watchword for professional presentations, scholarly papers, inservice workshops, and editorial columns for years. The connection has long been taught, studied, and researched. The major reason for this is that teacher educators feel that teachers should be efficient decision makers. A theory that is clearly understood and firmly in place helps teachers justify the practices that are used in the classroom (Moffett & Wagner, 1983). The rationale is that if teachers understand what they are doing and why they are doing it, then they are in control of the activities that are planned in the classroom rather than being controlled by them. The conceptual framework that they possess is a filter through which all material, content, and practices must flow to determine their worth for effective teaching.

On the other hand, there are plenty of teachers in classrooms today who say they don't have a theory and don't need a theory. These teachers desire more practical approaches to classroom instruction and are painfully aware that they can't simply teach a theory to students, but must engage students in the process. For example, students would benefit little from learning a theory of writing or reading, if they weren't also engaged in writing and reading. What researchers are now beginning to see, however,

is that theory is implicit in practice and those teachers who are favoring practicality in teaching are in fact adhering to the implied theory inherent in the practice when they make instructional decisions. These researchers also see that theories are easily recognizable in the classroom behaviors of teachers. Research in reading/ language arts especially shows that educational theories and teaching behaviors very often tend to support one another. Diane DeFord (1979) has detailed the concept of theoretical orientations, consisting of a set of beliefs or assumption held toward reading instruction. Based on their work with teachers, Kamil and Pearson (1979) have stated that "every teacher operates with at least an implicit model of reading . . ." (p. 10), while Harste and Burke (1977) have found that "despite atheoretical statements, teachers are theoretical in their instructional approach to reading" (p. 32). With theoretical orientations implicitly or explictly intact, teachers use theories to guide classroom planning and instruction.

With that understanding, the authors of this paper all engaged in inquiry projects that explored the role of theory in instruction, decision-making, professional development, and teacher/student transactions. The studies represent a variety of approaches to inquiry and have as informants in the studies a cross section of teachers and students. The study by Karen Ray (1987) was an observational study of teachers and students theories of reading/language arts in designated advanced, average, and remedial classes. Three teachers were identified and observed for seven months. Interviews were given and field notes were taken during classroom observation. After data analysis, she concluded that all three teachers acted consistently according to their personal theory of reading and writing. These teachers held certain assumptions regarding reading,

writing, student abilities, student learning, and classroom management that affected their theoretical orientations.

The study by Leslie Patterson (1987) was a naturalistic study of a single teacher's process of explicit theory building. As a teacher/researcher, she studied herself and her students as she put into place her emerging theory of the socio-psycholinguistic nature of reading/language arts. Her data also supports the literature concerning the theoretical nature of instructional decision-making, and paves the way for the study of the process of theory building.

Sharon Lee (1987) in her qualitative study of teacher theory development, interviewed 25 reading/language arts teachers about their theories of language learning and their understanding of the process of theory building. She has developed a model of explicit theory formulation that outlines the path that many of the teachers in her study followed as they progressed from novice teachers to empowered educators who are easily able to share theory with colleagues.

These studies all have important messages about how teachers put theory into practice and they each offer even more evidence to show that teacher decision-making is theory driven. Although many conclusions of these studies warrant further explanation and exploration, the implications for teacher education will be the force of the present article. While we feel we have much to offer the research community concerning the methodology and analysis of our findings, our primary task at the present is to offer some suggestions for teacher educators. We would like to give some direction to those engaged in the task of helping teachers to take ownership of their own professional development as they move from teachers under

the weight of mandates and external expectations to empowered risk-takers who can become hypothesis-testing, inquiring teachers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

We believe that our research shows emphatically that teacher educators should be involved in the process of helping preservice and inservice teachers build explicit theory bases for their instructional decision-making. There are several reasons why we feel theory building must be encouraged in all phases of teacher training. The most basic reason is pivotal in the remaining points we make: teachers' theories (explicit or implicit) actually do influence their instructional decisions. For some researchers, this is a self-apparent truth. There is, however, considerable support in the literature (DeFord, 1979, 1981, 1985; Goodman & Watson, 1977; Harste & Burke, 1976; Kamil & Pearson, 1979). The study by Ray (1987) is another critical contribution to the literature in this area. Her data clearly shows that teachers theories are easily recognizable in their behaviors. As the three teachers had different theories, their classroom behaviors likewise varied according to their professed theories of reading and writing. Their theoretical orientations included assumptions regarding other factors as well since teacher's beliefs about how children learn and how a classroom should be managed are critical issues in instructional decision-making.

An obvious implication of this link between individual teachers' theoretical orientations and their instructional decisions, is that teacher educators should help preservice and inservice teachers build explicit theory bases to serve as rationales for instructional decision-making. Not all teacher educators see this explicit theory-building as a critical

component of teacher training, but we see at least four ways in which explicit theoretical orientations can function for teachers.

Instructional Decision-making

First, explicit theories can give teachers criteria for evaluating professional decisions, for seeing inconsistencies among their classroom management techniques, their choices of instructional activities, their assessment methods, and their stances toward students, parents, and administrators. As Lee (1987) reports on her interviews with 25 teachers of a wide variety of backgrounds, several of those teachers recognize that what they believe about instruction gives them a way to evaluate options and make professional decisions:

> I don't think I'd be where I am now . . . if I didn't (put theory into practice). I do what I believe.
>
> I do the things I do with my kids because I know it's important.

Patterson (1985) says that as she learned about socio-psycholinguistic approaches to language learning and became convinced that those approaches were consistent with the kinds of activities she had intuitively chosen in the past, she became a more confident insructional decision-maker. When she could articulate the characteristics of socio-psycholinguistic language learning cited in the literature, she was then able to choose complementary learning activities: pen pal letters; dialogue journals; student publishing; among others.

Theory Revision

A second argument for helping teachers build explicit theories is that explicit theories can be easier to revise than intuitions. Assuming that theories influence instruction and assuming that, ultimately, the goal of

teacher educators is to improve instruction, we can then say that one way to improve instruction is to revise teacher theories. That revision may simply be the provision of additional information or it may be the more complicated process of attempting to change a teacher's stance toward students. At any rate, common sense suggests that one way to change those theoretical understandings is to help a teacher bring them to an explicit level and examine them in light of personal experiences and pertinent research findings.

Patterson (1987) illustrates this process of theory revision in her own research and teaching, particularly through her dissertation, which documented her high school students' responses to a year of socio-psycholinguistic composition instruction. Because the review of the literature, the formulation of the research questions, and the data analysis forced her to bring her instructional theory to an explicit level, she was then able to confront the critical issues, consider the data, and revise her original perceptions and understandings. In contrast, teachers who never consider their theoretical assumptions, but who teach according to their implicit theories, may be less likely to question their perceptions or test their assumptions. They may be less likely to change their instructional approaches.

Benefits of Theory Building

Another reason why we should be helping teachers to build explicit theories is that the process of theory-building is productive for the teachers. As teachers consider the reasons why they like certain activities and why some methods seem to work better than others, they are forcing themselves to consider student responses to classroom interactions. These transactions become valuable data sources as teachers become kid

watchers (Goodman, 1978) who are constantly reassessing instruction in light of its effectiveness for continued growth and learning. The teachers in the studies of Lee (1987), Ray (1987), and Patterson (1987), noted that they make instructional decisions based on what they perceive to be student reactions. Teachers who are busy watching how kids respond to instruction are able to reevaluate, revise, and confirm their theories based on student performance and attitudes. When teachers are able to do this, they are engaged in the process of theory building which enhances their commitment as lifelong learners. No longer are their instructional decisions guided by what is easiest, mandated, or comfortable, but they are based on data that is collected in the classroom and analyzed in terms of the natural classroom environment. This makes all decision-making more grounded and gives teachers the attitude of a teacher/researcher who is constantly looking for ways to improve instruction based on the evidence that is seen in the classroom.

When teachers can develop this inquiring, hypothesis-testing attitude, they can learn a great deal from themselves as well as from their students. As lifelong learners, the teachers who are building theory build self-confidence and renewed respect for themselves as decision-makers. This was one of the benefits of the year-long inquiry conducted by Patterson (1987). She notes that the personal rewards of explicit theory formulation were just as profound and just as real as the professional rewards she enjoyed. The two facets of the process were so intertwined in her and most teachers that they can hardly be separated. Many of the teachers in Lee's study (1987) referred to events and incidents in their personal lives that they felt affected their professional life and talked of how what happened at school impacted their personal life. Because teaching is viewed by most

teachers as much more than a job, their self image would naturally be connected to their perception of their teaching ability.

Empowerment

Finally, explicit theories give teachers a sense of control in the classroom and in their professional development. The teachers who reported feeling a sense of control in the classroom (Lee, 1987) said that it was a feeling that came after many years. They did not feel in control of their classrooms when they first began as teachers because there were so many things they still did not know and so much that was expected of them. They all spoke of a process in which they were learning, questioning, and testing hypotheses pertaining to teaching. They admitted that once they became aware of the importance of lifelong learning as a teacher, they were able to gain control of the classroom and of their own developoment. Patterson also talks of how empowerment in her classroom came only after much deliberation and ironing out of her explicit theory of language learning (1987). The teachers who can finally get to the point of feeling in control admit that they do not feel they have "arrived" with all the answers about teaching. They recognize the constant fluctuations that exist in teaching and understand that what they know today may be changed as they transact with different students in different situations tomorrow.

The teacher who can be a lifelong learner is not threatened by the fluid nature of teaching and theory building, however. They are active in the recursive cycle of developing and formulating theories. They are not indecisive, but open to new data that may strengthen or modify their existing theories. This is the attitude that keeps them from becoming dogmatic in their beliefs and open to responses from students (Ray, 1987).

Conclusion

What then, is the link between theory and practice for which many teacher educators and classroom teachers have been crying? We suggest that this vital link is teachers developing and articulating their own explicit theory. This explicit theory is a personal integration of their experiences with knowledge they have acquired in various ways. Avenues to this knowledge could be as diverse as academic coursework, inservice training, and informal interactions with other teachers and students. However they get this theory, the important thing is that they bring to consciousness the theory implicit in their instructional decisions. We must remember that this theory is personal as it "binds together a multitude of facts so that we may comprehend them all at once" (Kelly, 1963; p. 18). This is what theory is, in fact -- a practical way to allow teachers to build meaning from the diverse experiences encountered in their daily professional lives and to function in that environment.

REFERENCES

DeFord, D. (1979). A validation study of an instrument to determine a teacher's theoretical orientation to reading instruction. Bloomington, Indiana University. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

DeFord, D. (1981). Literacy: Reading, writing and other essentials. Language Arts, 58(6), 652-688.

DeFord, D. (1985). Validating the construct of theoretical orientation in reading. Reading Research Quarterly, 20(3), 351-367.

Goodman, Y. (1978). Kid watching: An alternative to testing. National Elementary School Principle, 57 (4), 41-45.

Harste, J. & Burke, C. (1976). A new hypothesis for reading teacher research: Both the teaching and learning of reading is theoretically based. In P. D. Pearson (Ed.), Reading: Theory, research, and practice, 26th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference, pp. 32-40.

Kamil, M. & Pearson, P. D. (1979). Theory and practice in teaching reading. New York University Educational Quarterly, Winter, 10-16.

Kelly, G. (1963). A theory of personality: The psychology of personal constructions. New York: W. W. Norton.

Lee, S. (1987). Teachers' perceptions of the process and function of theories of language learning. College Station, Texas A&M University. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

Moffett, J. & Wagner, (1983). Student-centered language arts and reading, K-13: A handbook for teachers. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Patterson, L. (1985). Becoming a teacher/researcher: Another avenue to excellence. English Journal, 74(7), 98-102.

Patterson, L. (1987). The responses of secondary students to socio-psycholinguistically based composition instruction. College Station, Texas A&M University . Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

Ray, K. (1987). The impact of the teacher's theoretical orientation towards reading and writing on the orientation and performance of students with differing abilities. College Station, Texas A&M University. Unpublished doctoral idssertation.